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Generic Structures, Generic Experiences: A Cognitive Experientialist Approach to Video Game Analysis

Abstract

The article discusses the issue of how to categorize video games – not the medium of video games, but individual video games. As a lead in to this discussion, the article discusses video game specificity and genericity and moves on to genre theory. On the basis of this discussion a cognitive experientialist genre framework is sketched, which incorporates both general points from genre theory and theories more specific to the video game domain. The framework is illustrated through a brief example. One virtue of the framework is that it offers a way to bridge the gap between game ontology and player experience; a brief conclusion discusses how the breadth of this gap may depend upon player biographies and also outlines how further work may proceed.

Keywords: video games, genre, experience, cognition, embodiment.

Introduction

My main aim with this article is to push, or nudge, the discipline of video game studies to shift its focus a little bit. More specifically, I think that video game theorists have been preoccupied with the question of video game *specificity* to the detriment of investigating video game *genericity*. In other words, we might shift our attention from questions such as "What is a game?", "What is a video game?" or "What kind of thing is a video game?" to "What kind of thing is *this* video game?" or "what kinds of things are *these* video games?"[1] The article discusses the issues surrounding this set of questions and ends by sketching a cognitive experientialist genre theory baseline as a viable approach to answering the latter type of questions. This theoretical framework also serves as a way to bridge the gap between descriptions of artefact structure and human experience.

The central underlying question of the following is procedural, i.e. "how do we categorize video games?", and I will present and discuss various approaches within genre theory as a connected set of ways to answer this question. I argue, in concordance with certain of these approaches to genre, that there are benefits to considering these questions within a cognitive and experiential frame – in effect constraining answers to questions of video game ontology to being answered within this overall frame. The resulting cognitive experientialist genre framework is offered as a viable way to discuss and lay bare both videogame structure and player experience. The paper thus argues for the concept of genre as central to the analysis of video games, to our understanding of how the medium instantiates itself in specific products, and to how these games foster certain experiences. The main underlying conceptual figures running through this argument are *typicality* and *genericity*, but this does not mean that there are no medium specific traits within the framework, only that I urge that we do not focus exclusively on medium specificity in order to explain video game structure and their appeal as designed experiences.

Structure of the article

The article starts by laying out some general issues, dealing with analysis and categorization of video games as a particular domain of analysis. The article then moves to a discussion of genre and genre theories where the initial claims are integrated by defining genre both as a social cognitive force and as worlds of finite experience which employ a potentially vast, but still limited number of generic resources. This genre framework is then fleshed out with reference to video game structure,

[1] The inspiration for this way of setting up the issue comes from Wittgenstein (1958) and Austin (1961).

and the framework is backed up by an illustration by way of game analysis. The article ends with some remarks on genericity and individual experiences and outlines avenues for further research within the cognitive experientialist framework.

Genericity, specificity, ludology and comparison bases

The fundamental issue discussed in the following is that of classifying video games and their experiential potential, and I will start out by discussing the situation where one compares video games to other domains – a comparison *between* domains which involves what I call comparison bases. The overall goal of the article, however, is to consider comparisons situated more specifically *within* the domain of video games, and the issue of how specific video games offer potentially generic experiences of particular kinds. These two discussions, i.e. inter-domain and intra-domain, feed into each other at certain points, and, as I will show, connections of typicality and genericity can be traced both between different domains as well as within the domain of video games. The inter-domain issue has some implications for the status of the field of video game theory, so this first section adresses the inter-domain issue before the remainder of the article tackles intra-domain issues.

First off, I want to address a possible complaint and/or misinterpretation having to do with the flip-side of typicality and genericity, namely the possibility for a phenomenon to be unique or special. Why not look at the latter instead? I take it that this dichotomy is akin to discussing the proverbial glass which may be seen as either half-full or half-empty. The present argument aims at building a plausible case for typicality and for the generic nature of both products and experience, but others may very well take the other approach – and we need not see this as an issue of mutual exclusivity, since one might argue that analyses of typicality can help us identify any a-typical aspects of products and experience, since the figure of the a-typical would stand out clearer on the ground of what it is not.

Moving closer to the preoccupations of video game studies as a field, one might want to argue that the domain of video games has the potential to offer unique or at least special products and as a result offer unique or special experiences – hence the need for a specialized discipline of enquiry.[2] This would amount to what I would call a general ludological position, and here I use

[2] The comment about glasses and their contents applies here as well: *anything* could be seen as yielding unique experiences given that inclination; this is the flipside of the well-known argument that anything can be seen as similar to anything else. This, in turn, means that everything can be seen as yielding typical experiences, but I shall attempt to elaborate and unpack this seemingly vacous claim as we go on.

ludology in a broader sense than that used in the so-called ludology-narratology debate[3]. I use it to label a position which I think is more general and still potentially active, namely an insistence that studies of video games should prioritize adressing the *specificity* of video games as category. This, in turn, makes for prioritising theoretical expositions which are, to differing degrees, in opposition to any theoretical framework which was originally developed to analyse something else[4]: Attacks on, for instance, narrative theory thus instantiate a more general oppositional stance towards any kind of "theoretical imperialism". As can be seen, this issue almost necessarily involves a *comparison base*, and this is usually one or more of the established popular arts or mass arts such as novels, drama, television and film; in the ludology-narratology debate the comparison base is either individual works of narrative fiction or the theoretical framework amassed to analyse such things, i.e. narratology. I am setting things up this way initially because I see the ludology-narratology opposition as an instance of a broader issue which has relevance for the following argument, and I also want to make explicit the position of that argument: I think there are good reasons for continually keeping in mind and even at times explicitly holding such a ludological position, but the present article is not primarily intended as a contribution to carving a special niche for video game analysis in this sense of ludology. Rather, the article seeks out genericity related to video games quite broadly by synthesizing across the theoretical landscape of genre theory in general and by discussing the operations and their implications involved. There is a Wittgensteinean point to be made here: Things can be made to fit many categories, and categorization often involves the act of putting things in a certain perspective, of urging people to see things "in such-and-such a way" (Wittgenstein 1958, §74). The perspective urged here is broad, and does not at the outset shy away from applying material from other domains.

Ontology and experience

Keeping with the ludological mindset, one could argue that the position involves a claim that the *ontological category* of video games is different from other ontological categories. Our present aims, namely that of analyzing video game products as well as experiences, introduce a need for

[3] For a representative expression of the early phase of this debate, see Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan (2004) and for a later commentary see Simons (2007).

[4] There is one domain which *is* allowed for self-avowed ludologists such as Juul (2005) and like minded writers such as Salen and Zimmerman (2004): The domain of games. Their position seems to be that video games are or should be seen simply as part of this domain – give or take a couple of provisos. One might thus say that the ludologist that I am conjuring forth is really a *video*-ludologist.

framing such a claim as implying a problem of relevance: Ontological inventory would be relevant only insofar the alleged and distinct properties of video games more or less lawfully lead to human experiences: Only that which makes sense to human players should be included in the analysis. This type of claim may seem banally self-evident to some, but such a constraint on considerations of ontology is by no means the case with many of the distinctions routinely employed by e.g. the natural sciences, and we should probably not expect it to apply to the study of video game ontology across the board, so to speak. We might, for instance, make the claim that there are, in fact, important ontological differences located on the computational level between a computational system which delivers its audiovisual representations on the basis of real time computational simulation as opposed to one which merely plays back a pre-recorded sequence – but there might very well be no experiential difference to observers of such representations. Shackling ontology to human experience takes care of one part of the relevance problem, but it still remains to prioritize between the mass of ontological properties which can be experienced, which is what one might call a second-order problem of relevance. A staunch ludologist might not accept any considerations of ontological traits leading to experiences which are (too) similar to experiences one might have when using the usual comparison bases, i.e. those of the popular and mass arts. To take an example, the ludologist would accept that World of Warcraft is a fantasy game, but find this fact much less interesting than the fact that it is a massively multiplayer online game employing a particular quest-based system of progression.

To be clear: My argument in the following is neither that video games as a category of products cannot be individuated ontologically or experientially, nor that video games offer the exact same set of experiences as any other popular or mass art in existence. Although questions of ontology and human experience can be separated, the following is based on letting these two domains constrain each other and a cognitive experientialist perspective on genre can help formalize the intuition that the relevant ontological differences, i.e. properties of video games, are exactly those which would be relevant to human interactors. With regards to the second-order problem of relevance, I will assume without arguing in depth that experiences offered by video games *can* in fact be relevantly dis-similar from the experiences offered by other popular arts, chiefly because of their interactivity, and this concept will thus play an important later in the article. However, video games can still be analysed as exhibiting relevantly similar properties found in many other categories established both outside and within the popular and mass arts. Ludologist readers who see videogames as intuitively and obviously completely different from other arts –

and, as a consequence hereof, prefer all theoretical and rhetorical moves to reflect this – will probably not like the general line of argument here; such readers are hereby duly warned (and may use the argument for conceptual target practice, if nothing else). In other words, I am fully aware that labels such as "free-to-play", "multiplayer real-time strategy" or even "multiplayer online battle arena" can be meaningfully applied to certain video games and not to very many other things, if any. However, there are also many aspects of genericity in games which do not achieve the level of specificity seen in many of the labels applied by members of gaming cultures (including academics who play games), and I take it that both genericity and specificity are relevant fields of investigation.

In the remainder of the article, I will work towards sketching a cognitive experientialist video game genre framework and outline how and why it can form a baseline for analyses of video games and their potential for structuring player experience. The approach will be to present genre theory as a broad field of enquiry and gradually constrain this field by explication and discussion, moving closer to video game specificity in the process. And, I should warn the reader, ludologist or not, that this will be just as much about the process of asking and answering questions related to categorization as it will be about unearthing (a set of) set categories. Genre is a notoriously difficult concept to handle – not least because it is often taken for granted – but as I see things, there is no getting around these difficulties if we want to deal with questions of game structure and experience. Finally, it should be noted that the following argument applies most readily to the subset of video games which Aarseth refers to as games with virtual environments (see (Aarseth 2003)) – exemplars would be *Half Life*, *The Elder Scrolls* or *Super Mario Galaxy* instead of *Tetris* and *Bejeweled*.

The notion of genre

Genre is arguably both the most fundamental and most popular means of categorising objects within the popular and mass arts and within communication studies, spanning studies of rhetoric, literature, film, and television; overviews of genre theory as a general endeavour within the arts as well as specific applications can be found in Frow (2006), Neale (2000) and Altman (1999). The discussion of genre can be seen as a particular instance of general and ubiquitous procedures of categorization and their involved operations (Bowker and Star 1999), but as often noted, even if "genre" is just the French word for category, any old category does not a genre make – it is quite possible to create, say, a category of works of popular art with the words "Dead" in their title, but this category is obviously not a genre. The discussion about what it takes for a category to be a genre is essential to

genre theory but also quite complex, and I will, for starters, bring out only one central notion common to most genre theories, namely that genre brings human participants into a *shared understanding of the kind of activity* taking place. In Frow's words, genre is "a systemic existence" and "a shared convention with a social force" (p. 102) which organizes a large set of cognitive structures with the overall purpose of establishing *what to expect* from a given utterance or work. Genre "presupposes certain kinds of knowledge" (Frow, p. 81) and this presupposed collective knowledge is crucially connected to the way works themselves signal their genre(s)[5]. This makes genre a fundamentally cognitive concept: Not only does genre organize the structure of the work, it organizes the structure of cognition, and this organizing allows genre to do its work. This conceptualization of genre echoes one of the main motivations of Thomas Schatz's (1981) seminal work on film genres: To Schatz, genre is both "a system" and "a social force"; this is what Schatz refers to as a social ritual view of genre.

I suggest we initially follow both Frow and Schatz, although this entails a path not entirely straight and maybe not quite as narrow as some might prefer. My approach here will be to move from the most general issues related to typicality and genericity and move towards more specific issues – towards the specifics of typicality and genericity, one might say. General syntheses of genre, such as Frow's, are helpful because they let us see how very general properties and processes are in play within the overall field defined by genre systematics broadly speaking. At the same time, certain processes and systematics laid bare by film genre theory, as seen in Schatz' work, seems to fit the existing field of video game production and consumption especially well: Some of these would be the situatedness inside a field of commercial cultural production; the collective agencies responsible for production in the form of development studios; the relationships between such developers and publishers; the heavy emphasis on formulas and sequels; and, perhaps most importantly, the particular relationship where the production sector is both removed from the sector of consumption and is driven primarily by commercial speculation as to what the consumer will pay for and otherwise voice opinions about – For Schatz, this "active but indirect audience participation" is part of the basis of "any popular commercial form" (p. 12). The fact that video

[5] One of the most immediately visible ways to achieve a particular framing in the cultural industries is the extensive use of paratext(s), where products such as games are explicitly furnished with genre labels – but collective understandings obviously also depend upon previous experiences of the works themselves, which form the basis of the myriad potential relations between individual works that genres offer to the producers and consumers, without these being explicated by paratexts.

games is (or can be treated fruitfully as) such a form should be somewhat uncontroversial, but my aim here is to investigate and substantiate what it may lead us to, especially in terms of consequences for analysis of video game structures relevant for experiential potential.

Genre as typified action

One of the assumptions informing the intended genre synthesis is, then, that a conceptualisation of video game genres is necessarily cognitive and not completely specific to the video game domain. Frow can profitably serve as the main proponent of such a view since his theory of genre incorporates insights from literary theory as well as rhetoric, ethnography and organizational studies, where genre has been broadened to include all kinds of things communicative, e.g. business letters, sermons, greetings etc. Genres within all these areas can be seen as fundamentally based in *typicality of communicative actions*, an approach traceable to Miller (1984). The main point here is the focus offered by this notion of *typified actions* as a potential component in the production, consumption and experience of utterances and works: A genre theory based in identification of typified actions seems both readily applicable and highly relevant to the video game domain. That is so because, among other things, it allows us to see first how the actions of collective agencies involved in game *production* are typified by conforming to genre rules and formulaic principles of design where genre is structuring "the range and substance" of creative work within game genres (cf. Schatz). In addition, the *experience* of video games are all about player agency: video game genres imply a clearly identifiable set of typified actions on the part of players, and the experience of the typicality of video games is tied directly to an attitude identified by Schutz (1962), which he argues is the cornerstone behind our uncomplicated being-in-the world: the attitude based on experiences of the typical and that of "I can do it again". Genre is cognition in action – typified action.

It should be obvious, however, that the universe of typified actions relevant to computer game production and consumption is mostly a highly asymmetric one – in most instances, the developers of games perform actions which differ markedly from the actions that players perform. Despite this asymmetry the overall notion of genre can be used to bridge this gap between production and consumption of popular and mass art because genre is a means for authors to stabilize user experience by giving them what they think the audiences want and expect from a generic work of popular art – in effect forming a recursive system of expectations of expectations.

Genres constrain the experiences of audiences, and audiences expect genres to do so in generically specific ways[6].

Genre as finite provinces of meaningful experiences

Frow refers to Alfred Schutz when he argues that genres project specific worlds of meaning, i.e. universes where only particular meaningful relationships can be established (see also Schatz, p. 9); Frow uses Schutz's term "finite provinces of meaning" to describe such genre-specific worlds. Frow himself refers to the representational aspect of genre and states that Schutz "defines these provinces as experiential rather than representational" (Frow, p. 87), and by following Schutz instead of Frow we end up with a more explicitly experiential approach where genre works offer *finite provinces of meaning where a particular set of meaningful experiences can be had*. One can apply this approach to the issue of the projections of worlds of meaning in video games with the following result: not only do fictional works project a genre-specific fictional world, but video games constitute a world of meaning in their totality which goes beyond the notion of fictional worlds[7]. My argument is now that video games as *total systems to be interacted with* – i.e. total systems of represented worlds and embodied interactions related to both the interface and to the represented world as well as other aspects of the game – create finite worlds of experience. *The overall game system is the artefactual component of a (potential) system of activity that scaffolds finite provinces of generic meaningful experiences*.

We can add a few components to this theory of categorization to tie it more clearly to previous mentionings of typicality and player agency. First, we can follow a Wittgensteinian lead in noting that categorization often revolves around particular activities; one of Wittgenstein's lasting contributions to discussions of categorization has been the concepts of language games and perhaps especially family resemblances as basis for categorization. The most important point, however, in this particular context is the focus on activity: As Austin (1961) has pointed out, an activity such as a game of cricket offers a particular and readily understandable organization of many disparate things in one category *based solely in the nature of the activity*. We may note en passant that this example employs a game to drive its point home, but the key point here is that *certain categories are structured by a larger gestalt of structured and meaningful activities*, not by language,

[6] This idea is commonplace in genre theory, but also within research in cultural industries domains (as in Hesmondhalgh 2007) and can be found in video game theory as well; see (Arsenault 2009) for a specific example.

[7] I will forego any discussion of whether video games are, in fact, fictional or not; I use the terms representation and simulation throughout.

similarity or family resemblances within the category (see also (Lakoff 1987)). This kind of categorization has been analysed in the cognitive literature as "ad hoc categories" (Lakoff 1987), where other examples could be activities such as "Things to take on a skiing trip" or "Things to do while in Paris". Such categorization procedures play a pivotal role in the present argument, since *the interaction with a video game system is the overall activity which structures the experiential category*. Thus, "Things one can do when playing an adventure game" is the overall frame which structures and organizes an immense amount of sub-activities and generic knowledge – i.e. it is a finite province of experience. It should be emphasised, however, that these categories are not at all served well by the label "ad hoc", since they are anything but that: Video games are, as already argued, elaborate products of intentional and collective agencies situated in a highly conglomerated part of the cultural industries where the dominant business strategy produces and distributes individual works as parts of series, formulas and sequels. Game products and gaming experiences are not ad hoc at all, but rather highly generic.

Generic resources

Frow makes another important point, namely that any individual work not so much instantiates a genre but rather makes use of the resources associated with it. Genre works or utterances are instantiations of "uses of genre", in that they make use of a collectively shared set of cognitive resources that allow participants to converge toward the aforementioned shared understandings. Additionally, Frow maintains that a given work or utterance participates in or performs many genres at once. Genre frameworks thus do not allow us to reduce works to having one specific set of properties. Rather, the relationship of genre to work is that genres and genre systems form a large set of generic resources which can be employed in any one work: A pick-and-choose model governed by a set of constraints operative in the particular domain of production and consumption. Such a "post-classical" view of genre is thus a theory of fragmented connections, not of unified wholes. Genre is seen as more fluid than stable and much of the motivation for this move comes from considering actual historical developments the popular and mass arts as well as organizational communication (for representative examples see Altman 1998, 1999 and Yates and Orlikowski 1992). Such an approach is demonstrably useful when dealing with genre in a diachronic perspective: as e.g. Altman's analysis of film genres demonstrates, cross pollination has always been the case in film genre developments.

The post-classical view to some extent goes against the idea of genre as a finite province of experience, but we can partially remedy this issue by allowing for this finite nature to

be highly subject to change over time, and thus not primarily in the individual work and only secondarily in genre as localized in specific spatio-temporal contexts: Any individual game obviously constitutes a finite province of meaning, since it allows for only so many generic resources to be employed. In addition, constraints can very often be identified where particular relationships hold between the resources employed. Finally, and connected to both of the previous points, one can often identify a set of identifiable generic systematics which could be said to dominate the work and others relevantly like it, and this is where specific genres as larger but still finite provinces of meaning exists. In other words, even if genre works are hybrid and similar to a plethora of things all at once – and here we see Wittgensteinean family resemblances reappear with a vengeance – it is often possible to say that a given work makes use of a particular set of generic resources common to a (sometimes very fuzzy) set of other works, where other resources will be used in different patterns in other groups of works.

This line of argument brings to the fore the fact that works explicitly labelled genre-hybrids actually instantiate a fundamental mechanism in that every genre work is hybrid to some degree. But, even very fragmented works can still be very generic, but in a heterogeneous fashion in that they may resemble many works and make use of requisite genre frameworks at particular points. In other words, parts of works may be extremely generic, but the network of relations between works will often be built by mapping sub-components, not wholes[8]. This may threaten the stability of a monolithic conceptualization of genre – and maybe fatally so, as argued by the post-classical position – but it does not threaten a notion of generic design leading to generic experiences if one operates with a suitably compartmentalized notion of design and experience. What is generic is the parts, not necessarily the whole.

We can tie this back to the initial mention of the distinction between inter-domain and intra-domain categorization procedures in the following way. The instantiation of a particular genre is a complex object that collects a multitude of generic resources in the same bounded object, in casu a video game. None of these generic resources need be the same or similar in any way. Such complex video game objects will exhibit similarities – "sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein 1958, §66) – with other complex objects, some of which are video games and some of which are not. This means that analyses of such networks of similarity and resemblance will potentially cover multiple levels of abstraction within several domains. As a

[8] For an example of how such multiple elements can be tracked in evolution of particular game genres, see Arsenault (2009) on the first-person shooter.

final point, this also means that we should probably seriously entertain the option of placing less emphasis on the notion of genre and replace it with sustained analyses of generic resources instead – many categorizations of games used in everyday discourse by developers, gamers, bloggers, wikipedians, and the games press single out very specific traits and properties as a basis for categorisation. These traits are obviously cognitively and experientially meaningful and they identify generic resemblances between games. We can and should hold on to this aspect of the theoretical framework even if we would not grant the label "genres" to such categorizations – they are equally generic and typical regardless of label.

The generic resources used in video games

Up until now, I have argued that socially shared and commonly acknowledged generic resources deployed within a genre system serve to establish a common cognitive and experiential frame. I will now move on to a description of such resources in the particular domain of video games, including but not limited to media specific generic resources. What follows is thus a brief synthesis of contemporary genre theories from the field of literature, film and television and rhetoric with some key proposals within video game studies. Here is an initial exposition: a video game yields a generic and finite province of meaningful experience, where players are invited by video game design to exercise agency within a system exhibiting a particular designed structure. This system includes combinations of hardware and software, most prominently a material interface, interactive simulation of a virtual environment by way of computation, and audiovisual representation of this virtual environment. The core of this system of simulation and representation is sometimes referred to as the game engine (Aarseth 1997); in its interactive simulation of a virtual environment the game engine employs generic semantic units, organises them in generic thematic relationships, and offer up generic structures of interactivity in concert with the rest of the system. Semantic units are agents, objects and settings. Thematic relationships refer to both temporal plot structure and the atemporal thematic structures among semantic elements (Schatz 1981, Altman 1999).

What is missing in this initial exposition, gleaned from established genre theories as well as established computer game theory, is an elaboration of the specific nature of interactivity involved (in Miller's and others' work this is the *pragmatics* of genre). Interactivity is a deceptively simple concept – widely thought to be distinctive of computer media and games but inevitably introduced as problematic and/or ill-defined (for examples see (Heeter 1989, 2000; Jensen 1999; Kiousis 2002)) and I will leave this otherwise interesting discussion aside and instead draw attention to two particularly relevant early sources, one dealing with interactivity in general and one with video

games in particular. Steuer's (1995) early article on virtual reality lays out interactivity as a question of temporal structure, range of choice and mapping of input; these parameters as well as the focus on tele-presence as "being there" fits neatly with the cognitive experientialist framework. Wolf's (2001) early video game genre proposal is important on other counts, chiefly because it proposes a game genre analysis based on both film genre theory (as seen in Schatz and others) and on interactivity. Wolf's argument is that games exhibit iconography and themes as well as game specific kinds of interactivity and he uses this perspective to group games into genres. Wolf's proposal privileges interactivity in favour of other particular (sets of) traits as the basis of categorization, and the result, obviously, rests on the particular conceptualisation of interactivity. Wolf's approach is inductive and ostensive – a la "this kind of interactivity is found in and thus defined by this (kind of) game" – and the resulting genres of interactivity seems to linger somewhere between historical specificity and a-historical generality. Later proposals have built implicitly or explicitly on Wolf's and one proposal for a summary could be that important generic distinctions within video games are meaningful choices (Laurel 1993, Salen & Zimmerman 2004)) tied to defined success criteria for interaction within the virtual environment (Juul 2005), (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008). One way to formalize such success criteria are to see them as player goals embedded in a structure of mechanics and dynamics (Hunicke et al. 2004) and another proposal for a more specific formalization of these success criteria, pitched at a higher level of abstraction, is that of quest structures (Aarseth 2005). In addition, we can also trace the embodied agency of players to their actual embodiment: Players interact with material interfaces and perform actual embodied physical actions, and one can thus argue that video game genres systematically structure *embodied interaction modes* of players by way of their generic material interfaces and their required embodied actions and requisite mapping to virtual actions (Gregersen 2011).

This synthesized framework is more or less able to capture the genre labels normally used in the popular video game press although the framework does not "output" those genres: Rather, the means for categorization are compatible in that they pick out qualities which correlate directly with distinctions operative underneath genre labels used by the gaming press and gaming blogs and such lists as that found in Fullerton et al. (2008). This should perhaps be emphasized: the intent here is not to produce a huge taxonomy able to directly identify any and all existing game categorizations found meaningful by players[9]. What is presented here is rather a framework that seeks to identify

[9] Another approach to classification could be mentioned here, namely that exemplified by Elverdam and Aarseth (2007) game classification scheme. Such classification schemes should, I think, not be seen as fundamentally antithetical to or

some of the main bases that would enter into structures of cognition and experience for embodied players.

Embodied agency, experience, and projects of action in games.

Although I have already tried to argue for the usefulness of conceptualizing generic resources as not exclusively game-related I will briefly elaborate on a few generic traits which, I would argue, are in fact particular if not unique to video games as a popular art. I will concentrate on the notion of embodied agency of players and tie this to the specific kind of interactivity which has already been identified as quests.

An important and consistent aspect of video game interactivity is not just the interactivity as defined in terms of game goals, but also in terms of actual embodied interaction (Gregersen and Grodal 2009, Gregersen 2011). Players interact physically with the control interface and computational procedures register and map these actions into meaningful action in the audiovisually representated game world. The material and physically embodied aspects of interactivity can be directly tied to genres and their developments: Both controllers and control schemes are standardized across platforms, genres and series of games. When conceptualising genre as tied to audiences and their genre-specific knowledge of what to expect from a given genre, the physical interaction mode is clearly part of this set of cognitive competences. This is thus one set of experiences which is generic, namely that of the experience of structured embodied interaction (Gregersen 2011).

But these generic embodied experiences are not just experiences of moving the physical body in generic patterns: The meaningfulness of embodied interaction derives from a fusion of primitive physical action and the feeling of being-present-in-the-game-world by way of representations of those actions. This compound experience is an experience of the body-in-action

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incompatible with genre theories, since both are at root involved in classification. One simple argument for classification schemes is that they allow for categorizing without making larger claims about genre and may be used to pick out categories which may fall outside of traditional genre concerns while still being useful. Since classifications schemes are often built with mutually exclusive subcategories, there is a tendency towards the aims of classical genre theory – either X is A or B, never both. It might be possible to build a formal faceted classification scheme from a synthesis of the available resources outlined above and tie this to genre concerns, but this would go way beyond this paper. The primary argument is still that games can be and are routinely classified as exhibiting typicality by people interacting with games and, in addition, that games may be said to utilize a vast collection of generic resources and in doing so instantiate similarities on many different levels. The argument is further that all of these similarities may be seen as the generic scaffolding of the potentially generic experience of playing such games.

in a generic world of meaningful generic experience. This kind of standardized and typified embodied knowledge has a tendency to very quickly become tacit and fade into the background of embodied agency – it quickly *feels* familiar and typical without thinking about it *as* familiar and typical. Standardized control schemes and their particular mappings of action are prime examples of how generic knowledge becomes background knowledge as a constituent part of generic experience: Players *know how* to manipulate controllers but they also *know how it feels*, for instance to take cover and aim a gun in a third person shooter series such as *Gears of War*, and they know both how much to turn the Wii Wheel in *Mario Cart Wii* and what it feels like to slide into a corner on a particular track.

A closely related aspect of such embodied interaction is the level of larger-scale intentional action which Schutz (1962) calls projects of action. In video game theory, such larger scale projects have been identified by Aarseth and others as quests, and Aarseth (2005) also offers a taxonomy consisting of a limited number of kinds of quests. Now, this in itself makes for a certain kind of generic experience, namely the potential recognition of standardized ways in which the game orchestrates player actions as particular kinds of quests, i.e. typified projects of action. These larger scale projects give the smaller embodied interactions particular meanings and these particular meanings are often tied directly to the generic resources of overarching thematic concerns, for instance moral structure and the simulation of social structure in the game worlds, but also to the possibilities for further exercise of meaningful and strategic agency since they often yield particular rewards in the form of otherwise unavailable resources, i.e. progression structures (Juul 2005).

A final point related to embodied interaction and typified actions is that the repetitive nature of (certain types of) video games means that a single game in itself may offer highly typified actions by way of repetition, i.e. such games yield a strong intra-game potential for generic experiences. This is where games seem to depart – and at times quite radically so – from other works of popular and mass art which rarely demand repetition of specific actions to the same extent: Many games demand that the player performs the same limited set of micro-actions over and over, not just in the micro-actions of manipulating controllers, but also in the meaningful actions such as jumping, running and shooting. Many arcade games based on skill demand that the player learns and routinises the layout of the virtual environment and the required set of actions. Games with virtual opponents will often feature certain generic attack patterns which make for generic strategies of action; difficult sections may demand that players reload and re-try etc. The potential for generic experiences must thus be considered both intra-game and inter-game and across many levels.

An illustration: *Red Dead Redemption*

To give a specific but short and merely illustrative example of how similarities and connections inherent in the concept of generic resources can be tied to analyses of game structure and experience, we can take a quick look at *Red Dead Redemption (RDR).*

The most obvious set of relevant generic connections in *RDR* is that of the various generic structures belonging to the genre of westerns. This set of connections cuts across media and representational modes and includes several non-interactive ones such as film, television, literature and popular music. *RDR* employs semantic units such as horses, six guns, cowboys, sheriffs, stagecoaches, steam locomotives, train stations etc. which are all handled by the game engine in its simulation and representation of physical and social structure. These semantic units are organized into larger clusters of events and actions by temporal/causal progression and connections into fights or flights, chases and captures etc. These concrete and clustered instantiations of agents and events can be tied to the related atemporal thematics well-known from analyses of westerns such as civilization vs. wilderness, lawfulness and crime, honor and dishonour, etc.

In video games, in contrast to less interactive media, the generic semantic units, their various generic combinations and their connections to thematics are coupled directly to player agency and strategic choices. The player controls the avatar in a series of causally connected situations (i.e. quest chains) which recruit both semantic clusters and thematics and tie it to embodied player agency which is required to perform and complete the project of action in time and space. This aspect of projected action is thus both similar and dis-similar when comparing games with the rest of the popular and mass arts: The overall structure of such projects of action will often be well-known from other media – rescuing the girl from the Indians, identifying, tracking and confronting a traitor to a common cause etc. – and may even be recognized as similar to specific individual works which themselves both make use of and supply specific generic resources of westerns. It is, however, important to note that the actual amount of choice in the realization of such projects will vary from game to game, and *RDR* often employs a simple binary structure on the immediate semantic level of action: agents may for instance be caught or killed, befriended or confronted etc. It should also be mentioned that the full package of meaningful generic experience will plausibly involve meaningful experiences tied to the larger cultural significance of these particular resources in the context of national culture and mythology: as argued by both Schatz and Cawelti (2004), westerns and their historical development can be seen as particularly important to the American culture and its development, even if the dichotomies involved can be traced to other

cultures (for a discussion of this issue seen as one of historical specificity vs. ahistorical permanence of myth in genre, see Altman 1998).

Further aspects of the generic nature of *RDR* may be brought out by comparing the game to another game which partially shares authorship and technology, namely *Grand Theft Auto IV*. If we look at the previously mentioned specific aspects of embodied interaction, the control mechanics of locomotion and combat using a standardised controller (e.g running, taking cover and aiming of weapons) are similar between the two games. So are many of the underlying laws of simulation related to interaction with the virtual environment, leading to a somewhat similar and thus generic experience of the body-in-action. Moving up one level to semantic units and their combinations, and comparing with the previously mentioned semantic aspects of the western, many semantic units used in GTA *IV* are obviously different. Moving to the level of thematics we come to see concepts such as honor, law, violence, and society as rather obviously related across the two games, and so are parts of the quest structures where the main protagonist has to deal with loyalty and former allies. Broadening the perspective further allows us to see that the particular combination of semantics and thematics in *GTA IV* correlates with the genre of the urban crime drama and gangster fiction, and these are overall genre frameworks which have several overlaps with the western in terms of generic resources, most obviously on what is here called the thematic level.

Additionally, if we look at the game design structure at yet another level of abstraction, for instance the expositional strategies used in relation to the quests, we find similarities both with regards to the protagonists back-story (akin to the story level in narrative studies) but especially in the formal devices used to deliver this information (akin to the discourse level): Both games use extensive amounts of pre-recorded dialogue delivered in both non-interactive cutscenes and during interactive transport sequences across the virtual environment (in wagons and cars respectively). The simulated physical environment also plays an important role in both games, but not just in terms of its simulation of physical and social structure. Rather, the two game worlds share a feature which exemplifies how game engine technologies can facilitate a quite specific kind of meaningful generic experience: the streaming technology pioneered by the developers, i.e. Rockstar, has led to expectations of experience of continuous and uninterrupted locomotion in a vast simulated world populated by objects and agents.

The finite provinces of meaning offered by these two games are thus similar in many respects because of many generic relations across several levels of design structure – not at all surprising, of course, if one finds notions such as authorship and authorial vision but also brand

management and path dependency in the cultural industries to be meaningful: Game audiences expect Rockstar to deliver a certain kind of open world experience which focuses on the criminal element in society and, in the case of the *GTA* series, to deliver an experience which plays ironically and self-consciously with the genre resources employed in the cultural industries broadly understood: Most *GTA* games thus offer potential connections to various experiences related to both everyday experience in the consumer society and to the experiences offered by the cultural industries and, quite importantly, often addresses their increasing overlap. While this playfulness in massive appropriation of genre resources may be somewhat specific to Rockstar and their output, the two games also offer examples of how one might engage questions of modality, e.g. comedic or tragedic, within this framework of generic resources. While these two modes are often seen as cutting across genre, they are highly generic in the sense that they play important roles in establishing and upholding much of the structure which makes the province of meaning a finite and coherent one.

One might comment that these particular similarities and relationships fall exactly as any reasonably experienced gamer would expect, especially since Rockstar's games have been well described in the literature already: nothing new to see here, in other words. It has never been my intention to offer even a remotely sophisticated reading of specific video games which would lay bare intricate meanings otherwise unavailable – quite the opposite, in fact. The aim here has been to discuss categorization – and touch upon its possible discontents – and to sketch a framework that allows for tracking of similarities and resemblances across several layers of design structure as the basis of experience. The framework formalizes some of the intuitions inherent in *RDR* being described as "*GTA* with horses" or Bethesda's *Fallout 3* being described as "*Oblivion* with guns"[10].

Conclusion

The framework outlined above allows for identifying and tracking generic resources used in video games across various levels of abstraction. The road towards this framework has led to discussions of categorization and several detours, a recurrent theme of which has been that of the general and the specific, again across various levels of abstraction. A final comment bears on the connections

[10] There are obvious connections to a richer analysis of authorship here. As it stands, the article merely aims to provide ways to identify the basis of *how* games can give rise to very similar experiences, and not primarily *why* these similarities in the products exist. A dismissal of the given illustration as a "statement of the obvious" with reference to the common authorship (i.e. Rockstar) thus presupposes what I try to provide more formally, namely a theoretical framework which details where and how we might track experientially meaningful traces of authorship in the product.

between works and utterances which exhibit obvious generic structure and the potentially generic experience thereof. It should be beyond doubt that the cultural industries deliver content that is more often than not highly generic and formulaic, but this does not mean that generic media content is always experienced *as* generic. Rather, this depends on the genre repertoire of the player in question. A player may experience a game as completely new and original and possibly unique, simply because s/he has never experienced similar games[11]. As a player becomes more and more knowledgeable in the field of video games and probably within one or more preferred genres, s/he may come to see specific games more and more in terms of the typical and the generic resources they employ. This may be a banal observation, but it only follows logically when one adopts a dual perspective on genre which includes a cognitive and experiential viewpoint as well as one considering design structure: Such a point is not immediately visible if one stays on the level of ontology and catalogues the often highly generic and formulaic output of the game industry.

Second, the experience of popular and mass art can be both very similar to and very different from the experience of everyday life. It is very plausible that the majority of everyday experience is both typical and tacitly experienced as typical, both in terms of the overall patterns of perception, cognition, action including communicative acts: Much of everyday life is just like it always has been, so to speak, and individuals quickly become socialized into this typicality – and we ordinarily do not take issue with this dimension of typicality (see Schutz 1962, Garfinkel 1967). Our expectations of the generic and typical in the popular and mass arts are different: Consumers arguably prize innovation as well as repetition (Eco 1985). It obviously lies beyond this paper how these preferences play out empirically, but it is a common assumption that if the player craves innovation in the artefact and only gets repetition, the experience of the too obviously typical and generic will lead to an overall experience of disappointment and boredom.

Finally, the analysis of generic experience does not presuppose experience to be predetermined, but it presupposes that many conditions for human experience will more often than not be generic and typified. There is no assumption here that genericity of situation and object will directly cause genericity of experience; what is assumed is rather a connection between generic structures and the generic experiences through partial awareness of these structures and a tendency for the human mind to experience the world categorically and to build up its repertoire of categories through experience. Apart from the implications in adoption of a cognitive and experiential genre

[11] Or has no experience of the relevant domains outside of games, for instance science fiction or fantasy literature or war movies.

theory, one of the upshots particular to video game studies is that if video games involve strategic action, choice and decision-making within designed structures, a key aspect of genericity of player experience lies in *the experience of the generic conditions under which player agency is exercised*, i.e. generic situated agency. Clearly, much remains to be said about the actual unfolding of game related agency as a process in time and space, and about cognitive, emotional, and skill differences of players, but the framework delivered here offers a baseline for the analysis of player experience as potentially generic.

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